



Building Missouri's future...by degrees

To: Missouri Educators

From: Robert B. Stein, Commissioner of Higher Education

Date: November 2, 2007

Subject: Open Letter on Curriculum Alignment Initiative

As many of you know, the MDHE has launched a Curriculum Alignment Initiative (CAI) to identify competencies for entrance into and exit from beginning-level collegiate courses. To date, over 350 faculty and administrators from higher education and K-12 are actively involved in sharing perspectives about this important agenda.

Recently, staff at MDHE alerted me to intense dialogue occurring among members associated with our CAI as well as from those less familiar with our work. Apparently some are fueling the view that the MDHE is stifling open discussion while others are implying that higher education is disregarding important work already underway by our secondary colleagues.

I am writing to clarify what may be misperceptions as well as to reinforce our commitment to an open and professional process.

This initiative has been structured to provide clearer messages to those in transition about expectations for success in first college courses. From the outset, I was aware that calling for higher education and secondary colleagues to be engaged in open discussion about competencies would be labor-intensive, arduous work. Throughout my almost 40-year career in higher education, I have come to understand that curriculum work is never easy and brings out strong opinions from persons genuinely interested in teaching and learning across educational disciplines and levels.

A major challenge in these types of discussions is to maintain professionalism, to tolerate differences of opinions, and to treat each other with respect at all times as we seek common ground on achieving the task before us, i.e., establishing what students should know and be able to do at point of entry into and exit from their first collegiate course in key disciplines associated with general education. When we fall short of this ideal, all around the table should help bring us back into focus. We should have a sense of urgency and commitment to close existing gaps between secondary and higher education without denial and without blame.

For the record, I want to share the following description about CAI so all of us operate from the same set of assumptions and facts.

Process

- CAI began in late July 2007 and has involved postsecondary faculty from across sectors representative of all public institutions in the state as well as 12 independent institutions.
- From the beginning, K-12 Educator Advisors representing secondary educators have been encouraged to become involved.
- Currently, 50 of the 350 volunteers engaged in CAI groups are from the secondary sector.
- In addition to CAI workgroups, there is a Curriculum Alignment Steering Committee (CAS) to ensure coordination across the workgroups and to discuss implications for state-level policy work. The CAS is made up of 1-2 liaisons from each of the 7 discipline workgroups, 6 postsecondary administrators from public institutions, and 5 secondary representatives named by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).
- CAI workgroups have been asked to consider the CLEs and assessment work already underway at the secondary level as part of their deliberations in addition to national recognized work associated with college readiness.
- The CAI process is open to all interested parties at the postsecondary and secondary levels. Ultimately, the Coordinating Board for Higher Education (CBHE) will establish public policy guidelines associated with the products that result from CAI.
- Whether you were involved from the beginning, or want to get involved now, all voices are welcome.
- CAI is in part driven by the recommendations of the METS Coalition; however, it is separate from the work of the METS Mathematics Subcommittee, which is working directly with DESE in their curriculum work on CLEs and related assessments.

Product

- The CAI competencies that are being developed will address two distinct areas:
 - Entry-Level Competencies: The knowledge and skills necessary to successfully enter into collegiate coursework at the broad disciplinary level (e.g., mathematics, English, etc.). The initial drafts from the workgroups were due on October 31st.
 - Exit-Level Competencies: Exit-level competencies refer to defining the knowledge and skills that a student is expected to have gained as a result of successfully completing a beginning general education course at the postsecondary level; these competencies are course-based (e.g., College Algebra, Composition 101, etc.). The initial drafts of competencies for these courses are due on January 4th, 2008.
- Once the working groups reach consensus on documents containing draft competencies, they will be posted on the MDHE website and available for public comment: Entry-Level Competencies will be available beginning in early November 2007 and Exit-Level Competencies in mid-January 2008.
- All public comments will be addressed by the individual discipline workgroups as well as the CAS.
- Once feedback is incorporated into each of the drafts, the competencies will be forwarded to the CAS for discussion and possible further revision.

- The CAS will finalize its recommendations on the competencies and forward them to the Commissioner of Higher Education. Based on these recommendations, MDHE staff will prepare materials for review and action by the Coordinating Board for Higher Education.
- DESE will determine when and how to align its assessments with the competencies identified for beginning level college courses.

Rules of Engagement

- This process is open; all participants are welcome.
- This dialogue is meant to foster professional discussions about what prepares a student to be successful in collegiate-level coursework.
- The initiative is structured to set thresholds that will maximize success for students wishing to access college-level coursework.
- There is an expectation that professionalism and respect in all interactions will be maintained from representatives of state agencies as well as from all participants.
- The discipline workgroups are operating through consensus-building within the framework of completing entry- and exit-level competencies.
- All individuals have rights to their own opinions and should freely disagree, but are asked to do so in a spirit of inquiry and in building consensus rather than finger pointing, name calling, laying blame, or fostering negative stereotypes.

Advice to Those with Questions and Concerns

- All meetings associated with CAI are open to the public. Get involved by attending one of the 7 discipline workgroups or CAS meetings.
- Engage in the process and let your voice be heard by sharing perspectives with CAI members already involved by:
 - Contacting one of the postsecondary faculty or K-12 advisors involved in the work and learn more about the process or share your views;
 - Contacting a member of the Curriculum Alignment Steering Committee to learn more about the process or to express your views;
 - Contacting MDHE staff to express your views or to get answers to questions about the work of the CAI
- Once draft competencies are posted on the MDHE website, provide feedback to CAI groups or MDHE staff including suggested changes along with rationale for your position.
- Avoid doom and gloom prophecy and focus on genuine curriculum concerns.

I extend my deep gratitude to all participants who are working with us on this very important initiative and encourage all others with an interest in our work to get involved. Together we have the potential to foster important changes in the way our higher education system operates that will ultimately benefit Missouri students in the pipeline.